



CITY OF BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Office of the Mayor

Thomas M. Menino

Emergency Shelter Commission

Jim Greene, Acting Director

Annual Homeless Census December 19, 2005

Executive Summary

In a precedent-setting count of the homeless in Boston, this year's City of Boston Homeless Census, held on December 19, 2005, identified **6,365** homeless men, women and children. An increase over last year's count of **5819**, this census comes on the heels of a successful advocacy effort to extend eligibility for shelter to the "hidden homeless".

Mayor Menino uses this term to refer to families who lack housing of their own, but because of the Commonwealth's eligibility criteria, were previously ineligible for assistance and consequently undercounted in recent census counts.

In 2002, the State's shelter eligibility standard was lowered to 100% of the federal poverty level, leaving many families over-income for shelter but too poor to afford market rate apartments.

Mayor Menino and advocates for homeless families have long expressed concern for these families. Denied access to state-funded shelter accommodations, they were forced to double up or split up, often living in badly overcrowded apartments, or in unsafe or abusive settings.

Advocacy to make the system more responsive to this hidden homeless crisis succeeded in this past year. Effective July 1, 2005, the Legislature restored the eligibility standard to 130% of poverty and eliminated other barriers to shelter. Consequently, the magnitude of Commonwealth's housing crisis is better reflected in this latest count.

KEY FINDINGS IN THE 2005-2006 CITY OF BOSTON HOMELESS CENSUS

On the night of the homeless census there were **6,365** homeless men, women and children counted in Boston compared to **5,819** last year. This is an increase of **9%** from last year.

FAMILIES

The total number of homeless men, women and children in families in all categories was **2,325** compared to **1,875** last year – an increase of **24%**. There were **1,704** men, women and children in congregate and scattered site shelter this year compared to **1,412** last year - an increase of **21%**.

There were **213** women and children in domestic violence shelters, up slightly from **206** last year – a **3%** increase.

FAMILIES FASTEST GROWING – LACK OF SUBSIDY INCREASES DEMAND

In recent years, Mayor Menino and advocates for homeless families have expressed grave concerns for families “shut out of the system” causing a crisis of “hidden homelessness.” Families denied shelter of necessity often had to double up, triple up or split up - often in badly overcrowded apartments, or to remain in unsafe or abusive settings in order to avoid ending up on the streets with their children. The State’s shelter eligibility standard had been restricted to 100% of the federal poverty level in 2002, leaving many families over-income for shelter but with incomes far too low to afford market rate apartments.

Advocacy to make the system more responsive to this hidden homeless crisis succeeded in this past year. Effective July 1, 2005, the Legislature restored the eligibility standard to 130% of poverty and eliminated other barriers to shelter access. Families that would have been denied shelter under the narrowed eligibility are now better able to access sheltered through the Department of Transitional Assistance. Previously, doubled-up or split up households that were unable to access shelter were **under-counted**. This is an important step in advancing the public policy and funding priorities necessary to help families stabilize and move back to permanent housing.

In total, approximately **746 households** were in family shelter, domestic violence or transitional programs on December 19th, compared with **505** households the prior year. The increase in the number of homeless families is consistent with data from the past several years, which suggested that, when eligibility for shelter was lowered to 100% of poverty, 42-54% of applicants for family shelter had been denied. ***Since July 2005, the denial rate for family shelter has dropped to 30%.***

There was a **66%** increase in adult male heads of household in family shelter, to **106** up from **64** one year ago. Most congregate shelters limit the number or cannot offer shelter to adult males and older boys. Many such families have had to split up while waiting for available shelter in the past. In increase in scattered site shelter capacity better meets the needs of families with adult males and older teenage boys.

INDIVIDUALS

The total number of homeless men and women on the streets and in all residential facilities was **4,040** compared to **3,944** last year - an increase of **3%**.

In three categories, unsheltered (on the streets), in emergency shelter and in hospitals the number of male and female homeless individuals decreased from last year.

▪ **Street Population**

The number of unsheltered persons counted on the street declined from **299** to **261** – a decrease of **13%** from last year. The number of elderly decreased from **77** to **44** persons. The number of women on the street declined from **57** last year to **34** this year. There were **17 self-identified veterans** on the night of the census, down from **25** a year ago.

▪ **Fewer Adults in Emergency Shelter**

The number of adults in emergency shelter was **1716** this year down from **1913** - a **10% decrease**. A programmatic change at the New England Shelter for Homeless Veterans of emergency beds to transitional beds accounts for some of this decrease.

▪ **Substance Abuse Treatment System Slowly Recovering Capacity; Homeless In Hospitals Decrease**

As substance treatment capacity has slowly increased there has been a decrease in the number of homeless persons in emergency rooms and hospitals.

There were **267** men and women in acute or transitional substance abuse treatment beds, up from **225** one year ago, an increase of **19%**.

Data showing **484** men and women in residential programs, compared to **147** last year, an requires some explanation: the Emergency Shelter Commission reviewed our census methodology with the State Department of Public Health Bureau of Substance Abuse Services to determine whether programs were properly classified. A few recovery home programs, such as the Salvation Army Harbor Lights program, that were previously listed under the generic “transitional” category are, in fact, recovery homes. These programs have been more properly categorized in this important system of care. Additional beds being brought on line contributed to this increase.

On the night of the census, **185** homeless men and women were in hospital emergency room or inpatient hospital beds, compared to **302** men, women and children last year – a **39%** decrease. The number of homeless persons in medical care facilities, while still high, is back to the level of **184** people counted in 2002, before cuts in Medicaid coverage and substance abuse treatment beds sent the numbers soaring. A hospital stay costs about \$1,000 dollars per day per bed. Emergency room visits, Emergency Medical Services and ambulance costs can add significantly to that total.

By doing a more comprehensive survey of the system, this census illustrates an important link between higher cost hospital-based care and substance abuse treatment funding. State funding cuts in 2003 resulted in the loss of 50% of acute substance abuse detox beds, not only impacting homeless individuals with alcohol and other drug addiction illnesses, but any person in need of such treatment.

Data from a Boston Health Care for the Homeless study shows that 59% of the chronic street homeless population has co-occurring substance abuse, mental health and other major medical problems. Many homeless persons in shelters and transitional programs, as well as formerly homeless persons now housed also struggle with addictions and encounter difficulties in accessing treatment. Further restoration of substance abuse treatment beds, relapse prevention and other public health services is urgently needed.

Longer-term residential care provides greater stability than discharge to the streets or shelters after a hospital stay. Compared with the \$1,000 dollars a day hospital costs cited above, the cost of treatment beds ranges from roughly \$250 per day for detox beds to \$150 per day for transitional beds and \$75 per day for recovery homes or halfway houses. Thus, substance abuse treatment beds provide both lower-cost and longer-term care.

- **More Adults in Transitional Programs**

On the night of the census, there were **745** homeless adults in transitional housing, up from **534** at the same time last year – a **40%** increase. Much of this increase reflects the New England Shelter for Homeless Veteran's programmatic decision to consider all beds in that facility as transitional for the veterans staying there. That data offsets decreases in Transitional Program capacity as programs such as the Salvation Army's Harbor Lights program was moved to the Residential/Recovery Home category.

Taken together with the **13%** decline in the street count and the **10%** decrease in emergency shelter numbers, this data demonstrates that Boston's shelter network for individuals is increasingly oriented toward transitional housing programs that better offer the employment, life skills and recovery resources that can be critical to self sufficiency and regaining housing.

COMPARISON: 2005/1995

Despite a substantial increase in the number of subsidized and low-income housing units developed or brought on line in the past decade, the number of Boston's homeless increased by **33%**. Escalation in the rental market over the past several years and the loss of Federal and State housing subsidies are major factors. There are **6,365** homeless people in **2005** compared to **4,774** in **1995**. There are **1,355** homeless children in Boston compared to **976** in **1995** – a **39%** percent increase. There are **1,558** homeless women in **2005** compared to **1,094** in **1995** - a **42%** increase. There are **3,452** homeless men in **2005** compared to **2,704** in **1995**, a **28%** increase. At **54%**, homeless men continue to make up the largest percentage of the system.

HURRICANE KATRINA EVACUEES IN BOSTON

In addition to the men, women and children displaced by economic hardship and other challenges in our City, numerous families and individuals displaced by Hurricane Katrina have resettled in permanent or temporary housing in the City of Boston. On the night of our census, **204** Katrina survivors in **54** households were believed to be living in Boston. More detailed information can be obtained from Children's Services of Roxbury.

Please note: these numbers are *not* included in the total homeless number reported above.